

Nisenfeld Testimony

Enhancing Cooperation Between Employers and Guardsmen/Reservists

Bill Number:

Hearing Date: October 19, 2005, 2:00 pm

Location: SD430

Witness:

Ms. Lisa Nisenfeld

Local Workforce Board, SW Washington State

Executive Director

Testimony

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today about employment issues for returning Reservist and National Guard soldiers.

The efforts of many employers to assure continued employment for our returning National Guard and Reserve veterans in both the public and private sectors is truly outstanding. These organizations well deserve the nation's recognition and thanks.

Much more needs to be done, however, to make sure that all our returning National Guard and Reserve soldiers are employed and economically stable. The challenges facing these heroes are complex.

Last spring approximately 700 Oregon National Guard soldiers returned home, many of them residents of Southwest Washington. Fully 40% of them were unemployed upon return. Another group of 700 is scheduled to return next month. Of these, at least 30% anticipate being unemployed. An equal number consider themselves to be "underemployed." This occurs as our region's economy is in the midst of a strong recovery. So while the employment prospects for the public at large have improved, the options for our reentering service people are not as bright.

In Washington state, citizen soldiers demobilized from the Washington National Guard's 81st Brigade also demonstrated a 40% unemployment rate among 1,000 returnees.

The largest number of these unemployed soldiers were jobless when they entered the Guard. To them, the challenges of securing gainful employment are even greater. They tend to be young people who have little, if any, college education. Some of them were students. Others were "downsized" during their service.

The transition for many of these soldiers has been very, very difficult.

Upon first returning to civilian life, they are provided with a substantial amount of information regarding employment and education resources in their communities. That information, however, often falls upon deaf ears because the soldiers aren't ready to jump into a job. They face many pressing issues: reintroduction to their families, housing, debts, and health challenges. So the usefulness of the information presented at demobilization is often limited.

Further, those who worked low wage, low skilled jobs are no longer satisfied with that. During their deployment they learned many technical skills, living in intense and demanding situations. They developed a maturity unlike that of others their age. Their expectations for work and family have changed substantially, yet they often come home to minimum wage jobs, debts, and challenging family situations. They may have physical and mental challenges as well, resulting from their service.

So they are given three weeks (or less) to decompress prior to re-entering civilian life.

How can we help solve these challenges? There are a variety of possibilities.

1. Provide military salary and benefits during a transitional year so individuals can afford to go to school. A wide variety of resources are out there to help pay tuition and fees for vets returning to school, yet many have young families and financial obligations which preclude full time education. Our economy needs these young people to pursue higher education and technical credentials, so this would be a sound investment.

2. Encourage civilian and veterans organizations to work together to reach out to returning soldiers. Congress has funded a comprehensive system of one-stop employment centers throughout the country. Those centers consider returning veterans to be their top priority population for services. For the most part, however, those programs are not connected directly to the various military organizations that are demobilizing soldiers. These programs stand ready to actively reach out to returning vets as well as their dependents, yet most are mystified about who to call and how to connect. Our system regularly mobilizes resources to deal with large layoffs and plant closures. Surely our experience in “rapid response” can be applied to working with these men and women.

Making these connections is especially challenging for Army Reserve units such as the 104th Division in Vancouver because they draw soldiers from 12 states. They need to better understand how to connect with local workforce systems. This is especially critical because their soldiers separate one and two at a time, requiring much individual work.

The best part about this strategy is that it is already paid for. Let’s make the most of the resources that are already out there.

3. Provide tax credits to assist small employers when National Guard and Reserve soldiers are deployed. In our experience, employers want to do the right thing. Small employers, however, have a difficult time bearing the substantial cost of training an employee to replace a deployed soldier. The natural result of this is some hesitation in hiring members of the Guard or Reserve. A tax credit to cover a portion of the replacement training costs would be helpful.

4. Assure that military training credentials are fully transferable. This already occurs in many arenas, but remains a challenge in others. It will require close coordination between

the military and state licensing authorities for many occupations, especially in industries such as healthcare and transportation where demand is high. Both classroom and hand-on experience should be transferable.

I look forward to continuing our work with Senator Murray on these issues. I thank all of you for your commitment to the success of our returning soldiers. I would be happy to answer any questions.